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C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 001793

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: VIOLENT INCIDENTS UNDERSCORE FRAGILITY;  
RUSSIAN RESPONSIBILITY

REF: TBILISI 1689

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. Three incidents on September 25 -- a car bombing in Sukhumi that caused damage to buildings, but no injuries, a landmine explosion outside Tskhinvali that killed a 13-year-old boy, and the shooting of a construction worker on the main road between Tbilisi and Gori -- underscore the fragile nature of the cease-fire and the continuing importance of highlighting to the occupying Russian authorities their responsibility to prevent these kinds of incidents. None of the incidents led to further violence, but accusations between Georgian and de facto authorities illustrate how any such incident could provoke new hostilities. Little concrete information is available, but no matter who the perpetrators were, all three incidents argue strongly for increased Russian cooperation in allowing international observers, including monitors, into the disputed territories. End summary and comment.

¶2. (C) UNOMIG and UN sources confirm press reports that at 3:30 A.M. on September 25, a car bomb exploded on a street near the Abkhaz de facto internal security services building. No one was injured, but the de facto building and apartment buildings were slightly damaged. Some de facto officials, including "Foreign Minister" Sergei Shamba and Iyuri Ashuba, head of the Abkhaz "Security Service," were quoted in the press as blaming Georgian special forces, while "National Security Council Secretary" Stanislav Lakoba was a bit more vague, blaming the act on unnamed terrorists trying to thwart the September 27 celebration of "independence." Georgian National Security Council Secretary Kakha Lomaia denied Georgian involvement to the press, suggesting that the lawless environment in Abkhazia was a contributing factor, while Member of the Georgian Parliament Gia Tortladze suggested that infighting among Abkhaz clans was to blame. Head of the Interior Ministry Analytical Department Shota Utiashvili said that the Georgian government has no access to information about the incident; head of the Presidential Administration Adeishvili appeared surprised when informed by the Ambassador about the incident, saying that he had no information about it.

¶3. (SBU) The press reports that on September 25 a 13-year-old boy was killed by a land mine in the village of Gujabauri, south of Tskhinvali but just inside the administrative boundary of South Ossetia. The South Ossetian de facto "Ministry of the Interior" announced it was investigating the incident. Utiashvili said that the government likewise has no access to information about this incident.

¶4. (SBU) Utiashvili and OSCE sources confirmed that a worker for the Israeli company Ashtrom (this company is also an MCC subcontractor for another project) was wounded slightly by a shot in the head while working on a highway project on the main east-west highway east of Gori, at the intersection leading to Orchosani. (Note: The administrative boundary of South Ossetia is very close to this intersection. End note.)

The worker and six others were attacked by a group of six armed Ossetians, who were apparently looking for property to steal. They tried taking a car belonging to one of the workers, but it broke down, so the attackers left empty-handed. Utiashvili added that the same group, recognized by the workers, later returned, by which time journalists from Imedi TV station had arrived on the scene. The attackers reportedly took the journalists' car and equipment and briefly detained the journalists; they soon released the journalists and returned the car, but kept some equipment.

COMMENT: A DANGEROUS AND FRAGILE ENVIRONMENT

¶5. (C) It is unlikely that the full story behind any of these incidents will be determined, or that the results of any investigation under current circumstances will be widely respected. What is clear, however, is that greater access by various international representatives, such as UNOMIG, OSCE, and HALO Trust, would both facilitate an objective investigation of such incidents and reduce their likelihood. Combined with three recent murders of Georgian police officers in Karaleti, Ganmukhuri, and Khurcha, these incidents underscore the dangerous environment along the border of both disputed territories and the real potential for escalation of violence, as well as the ultimate responsibility of Russian forces as the occupying power in all of these areas. End comment.

TEFFT